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ABSTRACT

Adult educators' philosophies of learning and teaching have a major impact on their evaluations of students. The evaluation methods used by adult educators are often incongruent with their apparent teaching-learning philosophies. Effective evaluation must be intricately woven throughout the teaching-learning process. Teachers must look at their own histories and experiences and consider how what they already know as a teacher affects how they will and should evaluate students. Some suggested springboards for reflection are remembering as a learner, remembering as a teacher, and examining personal teaching-learning beliefs. Before evaluating other adults, adult educators must realize that entering a learning situation forces adults who consider themselves competent, self-reliant, and self-directing to relinquish control, surrender to the authority of another adult or institutions, participate in situations where their weaknesses are on public display, and accept criticism from another adult just because that adult holds greater status. Adult educators must consider the evaluative context and ask themselves three questions: Who are the learners? What is the context for evaluating the learners? and Whose interests are controlling the learning content/desired outcome? To be helpful, evaluation must be clear, immediate, regular, accessible, individualized, affirming, future oriented, justifiable, educative, and selective. (MN)

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How Can Our Own Histories Help Us Achieve More Authentic Evaluation?: A Paper for Adult Educators

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Introduction

Who we are affects the evaluative situation. How we think about adult learners -- our philosophies of learning and teaching -- has a major impact on the evaluations we create. When evaluation is incongruent with the philosophy of teaching, learners are more likely to be confused or angry than helped. The purpose of this article is to help teachers look at their own histories and experiences and to consider how what they already know as a teacher affects how they will, and how they should, evaluate. The focus here is on raising many questions -- to jog, challenge, and prick those presuppositions underlying our practice that can cloud thoughtful scrutiny of our approaches to assessing learning.

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There are many examples of incongruent evaluation and teaching methods. Below are three stories that illustrate how ideas and actions can appear to contradict each other. What questions occur to you as you read these? Inasmuch as it is possible to engage with these situations from such scanty contextual detail, what alternate possibilities for evaluation approaches can you imagine?

Story 1: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: self-directed learning. Evaluation: graded presentations

A college instructor teaching a graduate course titled "Adult Learning and Development" informed students that the class was to be democratic and based on students' self-directed learning. The culminating project was a self-directed research study, and learners were invited to share their results with the whole class. But the presentation itself was graded by the instructor, using criteria the instructor had developed and failed to share with students until the final grades were in their hands. Even though the grades were relatively high, many students felt betrayed, and the instructor's evaluative comments were largely distrusted or ignored. Two students lodged complaints with the department chair.

Story 2: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: exploratory process-oriented dialogue. Evaluation: graded essay examinations

A seminar course called "Issues in North American Adult Education" was taught using collaborative dialogue among students. The instructor presented herself as a nurturing, guiding facilitator of learning, rather than an authority. Students were encouraged to question the instructor's statements, and to explore and appreciate multiple perspectives on various issues. To calculate final grades, students were given a single essay-type examination. The grade for the whole course was based on

the instructor's unilateral judgments of the written exams. Thus learners were shown that process-based exploratory learning inevitably ends in measurement of a product: knowledge is finally a substance, and learners are accountable to show and tell how much of it they've successfully accumulated. Surely this was an ironic finale for a course investigating collisions between alternate approaches to knowing and western norms of institutionalized education.

Story 3: Apparent teaching-learning philosophy: collaborative learning. Evaluation: individual achievement.

In a course titled "The Evaluation of Adult Learning," collaborative learning was touted as the philosophy of choice in adult learning situations. Learners were encouraged to share learning in cooperative groups, to explore concepts together, to teach each other skills, and to work as hard developing the group dynamics and the group process as they did contributing to the group's product. During class, a high degree of small group collaboration was achieved; however, the instructors graded students on their individual performance at the end of the course. Learners understood that the collaboration to which they devoted so much effort was not valued as much as their individual achievement, and they became bitter and cynical.

Admittedly, such stories are presented at such a general level of abstraction that they are difficult to assess. Many situational elements are unexplained; many people in each vignette, each with their own stories to tell, remain nameless and faceless. What, for example, were the purposes of the teachers? What was told to learners, and what did they think they heard? What personal motives and histories animated different learners in each case? What were the learners' assessments of themselves and the situation? What kind of relationship among learners and instructor had

developed, in what kind of environment, with what kinds of expectations, fears, obligations, and desires? What institutional norms and constraints shaped learning structures?

The point is that evaluation is a messy business, and influenced by a multitude of factors that often conflict. Effective evaluation is not separate from, but intricately woven throughout the teaching-learning process. It is difficult, and perhaps inappropriate, to analyse and try to draw lessons from others' stories of evaluation without grounding ourselves in our own rich histories of learning, teaching, and evaluation.

Reflecting on your stories of educational evaluation

We each have our own stories related to evaluation. Let us begin by calling some of these to mind. Below are some suggested springboards for reflection:

Remembering as a learner

1. Think-back to a product you created as a learner that you were proud of -- an essay, a piece of art, or a project. Do you remember the evaluative comments? Were they helpful or harmful? Was the process of creating the project more vivid in your memory than the evaluation?

2. Recall grades or comments you've received that were negative and critical of your performance as a learner. How was the feedback delivered? How did you respond? Why do you think you responded the way you did? From today's vantage point, how helpful was the feedback in your long-term progress as a learner?

3. Scan your memory for an evaluative experience from which you learned a great deal. Recreate as many details as you can: Who was involved? What exchanges and events unfolded, and how did you interpret these? Why did you as a learner value the experience?

Remembering as a teacher

1. Do you remember a method of evaluation you tried once that you swore not to do again? Analyse what you think went wrong. Did the problem lie with the method itself? Were there other underlying issues at stake -- like the difference between the expectations of the learners and the evaluation process and results, the lack of match between the evaluation methods and the teaching methods, or the way you used the method or reported results to learners? Or were you interpreting the whole situation in a particular way that you now believe deserves some critical reviewing?

2. What assignments have you given that learners appeared to enjoy and learn from, and which encouraged high degrees of effort and excellence? What common elements can you find that seem to made the assignments successful learning and evaluation tools?

3: Think back to an evaluation experience you directed where the general learner performance was unusually low. Assuming for a moment that the learners honestly tried their best, where did the fault lie? Was there a problem in the method of evaluation or the preparation of the learners? What might you do differently if you could repeat the exercise?

The importance of autobiographical reflection is commonly acknowledged among educators. We believe, as a foundation of our practice, that exploring personal

experience can be a powerful learning process in adulthood. We also know that simply remembering critical incidents doesn't always further insight. We need to ask specific questions about our experiences. What happened (as precisely as selective and interpretive memory can recall)? What did I feel? How did I interpret the events? What interpretations did I attribute to others? Can I suggest reasons why certain things occurred? What lessons did I absorb into my later practice about "what worked" and "what didn't" in these particular situations? From my current perspective, do I uphold these "lessons" as valuable principles of evaluation practice? What alternate possibilities can I imagine for my future practice when I dare to evaluate others' learning?

Such questions help us avoid jumping to simplistic conclusions in examining our own stories-- conclusions which may be inadequate for developing a more integrative, authentic, discriminating teaching practice. When we ask simply, "What works?", we invite solutions torn from unique people interacting in particular contexts that graft poorly to new situations. The result can be incongruities such as those presented in the three stories opening this article. Instead, more critical autobiographical reflection asks "Who am I as a teacher?" Or more precisely: From the patterns of behavior and thinking that I can discern from my own history in various contexts, what can I learn about myself as a teacher and learner, how I am formed together with the others who shared educative processes with me, and my ways of determining the meaning of "what works"?

When we ruminate from this point we can see how our present envelops our past, and shapes our future choices. We confront our philosophy. We ask ourselves the bottom-line question: To what extent do our methods and criteria for evaluation integrate our beliefs about what and how adults should learn?

Examining your teaching-learning beliefs

Spend some time honestly reviewing your teaching philosophy, those beliefs you hold about how people learn, what knowledge is most important, and what the role of an instructor is respective to the role of a learner. But before going on, call to imagination some recent memories of yourself in teaching practice. If you can, recall a session you facilitated in the past week. Imagine the time and place in vivid detail. Watch yourself meet the learners, open the session, and move people into activities. Look at how you move and speak. Watch learners respond throughout the session. Scrutinize ways you respond to their signals. Recall certain unanticipated choices you had to make in the dynamic flow of the session, and your thinking motivating these actions. Examine the outcomes of those choices.

Now, as if using a zoom lens, pull back from this instance to scan your past few months of teaching practice. What kinds of activities characterize your sessions? How much do you talk, and what kinds of talk seem most frequent in your teaching? What critical incidents with learners come to mind - and what patterns can you find in these interactions?

Now try asking yourself the following questions about the teaching-learning philosophy that is evident in your practice.

• Do you teach as though there are some essential concepts and skills learners should develop by the end of the program? Who (or what) specifies these core learnings?

• Do you help learners more to create their own knowledge, or more to master the knowledge that you and other sources deliver to them?

• Do you stress more collaborative or more independent learning situations in creating instructional environments?

• Is the content and process of learning controlled more by the instructor or by the learners?

• Do you plan instruction tightly in systematic steps, breaking things down and helping people master one skill or understand one piece of knowledge before moving to the next? Or do you organize projects and activities that are largely unstructured and integrate many processes at once?

• Do you plan instruction more to anticipate understanding through holistic "ah-ha" insights when learners put together all the pieces of a concept, or more to assist gradual evolutionary change through repetitious spiralling over and over similar concepts?

• Do you expect learners to demonstrate what they have learned in a program upon its conclusion, or do you believe much of the learning will only be visible at a later time?

Naturally, your responses to some of these questions will vary according to the teaching situation you examine. Different course content, learners, and learning contexts will guide instructor choices. Or you may feel that these questions imply that beliefs are either-or matters, when in fact they are complex and multi-layered. But overall, try to determine a philosophical pattern unfolding in your teaching. Then ask yourself, what implications do your answers have on how you proceed as an evaluator?

Now take a look at your practices of evaluation. Consider the following questions in light of your own history, recalling specific stories of learner evaluation such as those you generated earlier.

- Do your methods for evaluating learners really show whether they have developed what you consider the most essential learnings?

- Does your evaluation process allow students to reveal the knowledge they have personally constructed, or does it mostly compel students to display knowledge that you have constructed and they have memorized?

- Does the type of activity students must use during final evaluation match the type of activity they have learned during the instruction? (Does your evaluation ever use procedures that learners have not been taught how to use?)

- Does the language of the evaluation match the language used during instruction?

- Do your final evaluation procedures provide opportunities for students to really show what they know? (Do you ever try to trap students or use certain evaluation methods simply because they will keep an acceptable spread in the marks?)

- How much do learners participate in the evaluation methods of your program?

- Do your evaluation methods match your instructional methods?

- Do your evaluation methods embody your deepest beliefs about teaching and learning?

• Could you justify each assignment or method of evaluation you use as a valid way of assessing your learners' progress towards developing the most important learnings in your program?

Evaluating other adults - the dilemma

Adults have rather fragile egos. We protect our self-esteem and tend to instinctively respond to criticism by being defensive. Protective walls go up when we feel attacks on our sense of self and our feeling of control.

Children, too, are extremely vulnerable to criticism. Someone once said that it takes a hundred positive praising comments to wipe out a harsh negative comment given to any child. Children learn more by responding to praise than to denigration and criticism. Think of a child learning to walk -- a tremendous achievement in balance and coordination. What parent would stand apart from the wobbly child, pointing out her errors or punishing her for failing as she experiments stepping this way and that? Instead, most parents are as excited as the child with each new little bit of progress. We smile and encourage as the child pulls herself up to the coffee table, comforting her when she falls, guiding her patiently as she clings to an extended finger trying again and again. But in formal education -- from elementary school to adult learning -- learners often are compelled to measure up to standardized benchmarks and age-graded outcomes, or suffer the humiliation of being judged unsatisfactory. In this system people often learn to be competitive, to seek external approval rather than trust their own creative instincts, and to avoid making mistakes at all costs. Many learn that tests are traps, tricking them into failing.

This picture may be bleak, but many people remember the educational world of childhood as a realm of fear, submission, and boredom. By contrast, in adulthood, we usually take control of our own lives. Most adults believe they are competent. In fact, we recently heard a colleague talking about the findings of a study suggested that 90% of the adults surveyed believed that they ranked in the top 10% of adults in their occupation, in terms of ability and skill. As adults, we pose our own questions, solve our own problems, and learn to deal with messes and mistakes as best we can. Most of all, we learn to trust ourselves as the most reliable judges of what is worthwhile, and what isn't. This includes judging our own worth.

As teachers, we need to remember what happens when adults who consider themselves competent, self-reliant, and self-directing are once again in a learning situation. First, we lead people who like to be in control on a journey which is, by definition, a trek into the uncontrollable and the unfamiliar, pushing people out of their nests of comfort. Second, we require people who are accustomed to independence to surrender to the authority of another adult or an institution telling them what to do and how to do it. Third, we encourage people who believe that mastery brings power and respect, and who have learned to hide their weaknesses and sell their strengths, to make mistakes. We subject them to situations where their weaknesses are on public display, where they will likely fail, and where they may not compare favorably to other adults. Fourth, we expect people who have often learned to protect their status and sense of self, in order to succeed in a competitive world, to accept criticism from another adult just because that adult holds greater status.

No wonder many adults have difficulty accepting evaluation. Teachers of adults also often struggle with issues of control and personal self-esteem. Instructors and

students both have difficulty accepting criticism. Our first instinct is to disregard or rationalize criticism. Who do they think they are? we may ask. Some instructors have even been known to "lose" negative end-of-course assessment sheets, deciding that negative learners has their own problems, and shouldn't be taken seriously. External evaluation elicits even more interesting responses. Teachers often complain about the methods of observation, the unfairness of the criteria, or the unreliability of the evaluator's judgment. Sometimes the legitimate right of another adult to evaluate their work is called into question.

A simple truth lies at the heart of the evaluation process. It must be confronted by all good teachers and, if it isn't, there are no evaluative tools or strategies that will help learners improve. This simple truth is about power. When one adult evaluates another, a power imbalance is created: one person is in a subordinate position and must accept the authority of the other to judge. Most adults do not subordinate themselves enthusiastically. By nature we distrust, dislike, and disregard criticism unless it occurs within boundaries that keep our core sense of self and worth safe.

Considering the evaluative context

To better understand the values and assumptions you bring to evaluation, consider the following questions.

• Who are the learners? (When answering this question, consider the interplay between adults, learning, and evaluation; diversity and individual needs; and the pain of honest evaluation.)

- What is the context for evaluating the learners? (When answering this question, consider why context matters to evaluation; the relationship of teacher to learners; and the nature of the learning community.)

- Whose interests are controlling the learning content and desired outcomes? (When answering this question, consider who requires what information, and why; who will be using the information, and for what; and the politics of the evaluation context.)

Characteristics of helpful evaluation

When Stephen Brookfield (1990) writes about the process of evaluating learners, he emphasizes the threat of evaluation to adults' fragile egos and the responsibility of the evaluator to be sensitive to adult learners' feelings. He points out the tension between the relationship of trust that most facilitators work hard to establish with adult learners and the critical final judgments of evaluation that can damage this trust. Ultimately, if learners are angry or hurt by the evaluation process, they may not attend to the evaluative information. Thus progress is not enhanced when evaluation does not attend to learners' feelings. To ensure honesty, helpfulness, and sensitivity, Brookfield suggests that an effective evaluation process has the following ten characteristics:

1. *Clarity*: teachers must communicate criteria and methods for evaluation clearly to learners.

2. *Immediacy*: corrective feedback and suggestions are best remembered and incorporated when delivered immediately after learners' performance.

3. *Regularity*: to reduce threat and surprising results, and to increase feedback, evaluation should be an on-going frequent part of the instructional process (not left until the end).

4. *Accessibility*: teachers should be available to learners during and after the evaluative process to clarify, respond to learner concerns, or even to offer comfort.

5. *Individualized*: feedback should be directed to specific aspects of each learner's work.

6. *Affirming*: feedback should focus first on what the learner has achieved, before correcting and suggesting.

7. *Future-Oriented*: feedback should incorporate specific suggestions for actions learners can take immediately to improve.

8. *Justifiable*: reasons for judgment should match learner performance to the criteria required, and show how criticisms spring from a basic concern for the learners' desire to reach their own goals.

9. *Educative*: evaluation above all must be oriented towards learning and improvement, which may not always be compatible with warmth and sympathy that helps learners feel good.

10. *Selective*: to avoid overwhelming learners with evaluative information, feedback should focus only on a few areas that learners can reasonably work on.

Brookfield's list strikes a thoughtful balance between teacher sensitivity to learners' affective needs and personal frameworks for assessing themselves, and the teacher's responsibility in part to challenge and expand those frameworks to promote the learners' growth. Certainly this list attends to the issue of potential learner hostility. However, like any universalized prescription for strategy questions and quibbles begin to ooze the minute we try to apply it to our own contexts and autobiographies.

For many adult educators struggling with large groups, diverse programs and impossibly limited resources of time, Brookfield's suggestions may function more as worthwhile ideals to strive towards in certain educative situations than practical guidelines. The assumption of the list frames evaluation as teacher observation and response to a learner performance or product: a progressive linear sequence of snapshot, viewing/response, and learner improvement. Evaluation is presented as a planned process, and performativity is privileged. How can these suggestions be integrated into a curriculum that is emergent, holistic, and relies on spontaneity? Don't these suggestions generally reinforce learner dependency and teacher control? Why is continuous assessment, which expands the teacher's surveillance and power, then presumed a good thing? What about learners' peer evaluation and self evaluation? Many learners are more sophisticated in their desire to obtain and use critical feedback than these suggestions would imply. Why should the teacher make decisions such as what feedback to choose giving and what to withhold? What about encouragement of learners' own critical challenge of the very standards and evaluative systems presuming to measure them? What about the teacher's viewpoint -- why is this presumed to be infallible? Despite or rather *because* of such questions, however, Brookfield's suggestions and his interest in balancing learner-centered instruction with standards outside the learner offer a useful springboard from which to consider alternate approaches to learner evaluation. Each of us is responsible for engaging our own history in dialogue with such suggestions, exploring their usefulness only in terms of our own unfolding philosophy and practice.

Conclusion

Like any exercise of values, educational evaluation is a complex art. Daring to discern and defend a particular set of standards in a pluralistic culture, as one must inevitably do in making judgments, will often invite contestation. Dynamics of power, exacerbated by teachers' evaluation of learners, complicate the nurturing, facilitative networks that teachers often strive to create among people. Dynamics of trust hang precariously in the balance. The process of one adult judging another is always suspect. But it can reflect honesty and integrity. The purpose of this article is to suggest that most adult educators already know a great deal about evaluation and the environment of evaluation. If you are a teacher, you are and were a learner. As a learner, you discovered how you learned and what feedback enhanced this process; but you also learned about power and control in learning situations, and what it felt like to be judged. As a teacher you most likely aspire to enact a philosophy that promotes learner fulfillment and well-being. We hope that this article has helped you recall and assess both your history of practice, your philosophy of teaching and learning, and the degree of congruence in your belief and action. We believe that working to remember our own stories as learners and teachers can help all of us take stock and work to improve how we evaluate the learners we meet in our teaching.

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